



Columnist Robert De Andreis

When the music stops

by ROBERT DE ANDREIS

When we were kids we used to play musical chairs — you know, when the music stops all the kids have to scramble for a seat and the one without a chair loses. The day of my AIDS diagnosis, nearly two years ago, is when the music stopped for me — and I got caught empty handed.

When you first get AIDS, things become frozen in time and you're stuck with whatever life you happen to have at the moment. My life is quiet these days, not because of any shortcoming on my part, but because I was in the process of setting up shop when the music stopped.

Three years ago I left my many friends behind in L.A. to come back home. I wanted to be near my family and old friends before progressing with my illness. Unfortunately, the five years away left no trace of my former life here. I'd walk around this city, visit my old haunts and felt like a stranger in my hometown. Old friends had moved on or died off and it soon dawned on me that I'd have to start a new social life from scratch.

I used to meet new people at work, school or play, but I'm not in those arenas any longer. Because I was cleaning up my act, I put a 976 block on my phone so I couldn't continue to act on my rampant phone sex addiction — which I had barely untangled myself from during my user days in L.A. This was my big chance to start over. But over the years I had also made several friends from one-time tricks. At the cruel hands of fate, the music stopped during a most inconvenient time, when I was traveling on the road to recovery, but walking it alone.

If I had gotten sick several years ago, which I could have, along with my friends who died back then, I would still have married Bob. He would have taken care of me and given me the million hugs that I've missed out on these past two years of illness. If I had gotten sick during my grad-school days, my film buddies would have made a documentary about it. If I had gotten sick five years ago when I was in L.A., all my Louise Hay and Marianne Williamson groupie friends would have surrounded me with all their love and kindness.

But why now, when I've been in transition and so vulnerable? Because fate's a bitch and she does whatever she damn well pleases.

I imagine that new people are reluctant to befriend PWAs out of fear that they may be called upon later when things get scary. Don't flatter yourself. I'm so independent I'll light the match on the way to my cremation. People think that getting to know a person with AIDS entails listening to chronic complaints for which they'll be forced to invent endless advice. Oh please — that's what my therapist is for.

Friends who offer knee-jerk advice can betray their own lack of empathy. Giving advice is not always an act of compassion; sometimes it's a defense against feeling helpless. Someday I'd like to see

a flotilla of AIDS patients, hobbling down Market Street with walkers and wheelchairs, chasing all their "help" right into the bay, shouting, "Death to the advice queens!"

My cordless rang. It was my ex, Bob, calling from Chicago. He's coming out in a week to visit and escort me to the Cable Car Awards, where I'll be receiving the prestigious Board of Directors award for my binge-and-purge AIDS movie of the week, and the page-out-of-my-diary writing style. I'm also nominated in the category of Best Columnist Appearing in a Melodramatic Role.

Yes, I am dragging Bob two thousand miles across country just to escort me, but don't think I'm desperate, although I did have one slip today. For exactly one minute, I groveled, begged and pleaded with Bob to move back and live with me until I die. I told him I'd even stop taking all my medicines and treatments to speed up the process if he moved back in with me. It was a highly melodramatic moment. (As you can see, I am ruthlessly campaigning for that award!)

Since the beginning of my AIDS nightmare, I've been managing it alone and doing a damn good job of it. Yet no one has even tucked me in bed during any of it, given me a goodnight kiss or made me breakfast after a night of medical hell. After all my reckless years of different men every night for two decades of intimacy, I lack that simple touch in my hour of need.

People tell me how lucky I am to have my family here for all their support. Yes, I love them, but they make me feel alienated from my own gay identity sometimes, the way any person's family does. I have spend my life educating them slowly about my world. It has taken my mother 20 years to finally use the word "lover" instead of "friend" when describing a gay relationship. They don't fully grasp my second gay nature. How could they? They have never been oppressed, discriminated against, vilified, taunted, bashed, been denied a marriage license or spousal benefits or accused of being godless!

They love me, but they haven't experienced my 20 years of gay culture, its people and pathos, its humor, idioms, legacies and leaders, its music, hard times and simple pleasures. They don't know the passion that drives men into danger as they look for sex, or the impulse to call a girlfriend the next day and tell her all about it. They've never had friends who were

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entrapped and arrested, they never experienced the pink ceiling, wore a pink triangle or marched for their civil rights. They've never heard queens dish, snap and screech; they never heard of Miss Thing.

Growing up gay, no matter how loving the family, is like when parents adopt a

child of another race and raise it to be their own. For several years, the child feels like he or she is just part of the family, but then starts to realize they have a completely separate inheritance and feels like a stranger in a strange land. But the view from a strange land can be exquisite. ■